

Discovering Your Political Animal: A Class About The 2012 Presidential Election

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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I would like to thank the willing students in my class for their enthusiasm about the election and for their unyielding participation.

I would especially like to thank my fellow teacher and project partner, Kacie Newhouse for her help and support on this project.

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Abstract

In the current political climate it can be difficult to sift through the piles of information given to us about each candidate and make a decision on whom to vote for. So difficult in fact, that much of our generation chooses not to vote at all. To help a group of students who found themselves unsure, we created a class on the 2012 Presidential Election between President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney. In this class we explored different sides of important issues, explained some complicated topics and helped the students see which candidate supported what side of the issues. On top of this our focus was to help them discover their own political leanings. Throughout the class, we used assignments to gauge whether or not they were becoming more aware of their political stances and if being informed leads to a certain type of voting.

Personal Statement- Sysilie Hill

Teaching this class was one of the best experiences of my college career. I've learned a lot in my Political Science classes and taken tests on it, but now I had to take my knowledge and describe it to someone else. Needless to say, I gained even more respect for Professors because it was not easy. The most difficult part, I think for both of us, was to make sure we were constantly informed and almost predicting the types of questions the students would ask. The last thing we wanted was to be in the middle of explaining something only to realize we did not know enough information to do so. Another challenge was creating a standard of sorts with which to grade and making sure we were evaluating each student by the same standard. It's easy, as a fellow student, to want to give everyone an "A" but I really wanted this class to be a learning experience and to show we were taking it seriously and hoped they were too. This attitude returned great responses from the class as we received almost all "A" level work, everyone showed up to class and everyone participated. The discussions we had in the class were my favorite part of teaching because it really gave me an opportunity to have to listen to people who I did not necessarily side with politically, understand the argument for their opinion and even assist in making it stronger. I think this was a great experience for me before I go to hopefully make working in politics my career. Kacie and I complemented each other well as teachers as I tend to get stuck on one topic and she helped me by moving the conversations along. Also, we both have expertise in different areas and I greatly relied on her for information when it came to tax plans, while I know much more about Healthcare and women's issues. I could not have asked for a better partner in this project.

The primary goal we had in teaching this class, besides answering our thesis questions, was to share something that Kacie and I love and think is very important with other students. I only wanted to see these students become a little more informed and do our part to help more of our generation vote and I am proud to say we did just that.

Authors' Statement

As Political Science students, it had been impressed upon us throughout our career at Ball State that it was our responsibility, as citizens of the United States, to vote. However, we were very much aware that this is a right that many in our generation choose to ignore and that one of the main reasons they did so was a lack of clear understanding of which candidate lined up with their personal political stances or they lacked a political creed all together. This knowledge led us to the idea to teach a class with the intention of creating informed voters. As we stated in our syllabus, "The goal of this class is to provide the information necessary for students to be informed members of our political society." While our information focused specifically on the 2012 Presidential race between President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney, our main goal was to help them create their own list of sorts of political stances and realize what the most important issues were to them individually. This way, they could not only hold these particular candidates up to their beliefs and see which one fit closest, but also smaller races and Presidential races in the future. Aristotle said, "Man is by nature a political animal," and we were hoping to provide the knowledge for each of our students to discover their own political animal.

On the first day of class, we gave each student a survey to gauge their political knowledge, amount of participation, their political views and what they were hoping to gain from this class. These questions ranged from the basics such as, "Have you voted before?" to more difficult questions such as, "Who is the current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court?" We also asked them questions about their political stances so we could judge if their beliefs tended to lean Democrat or Republican. Some examples of these

questions were “Do you think employers have the right to have their insurance plans without birth control coverage because of religious beliefs?” and “Should Bush’s tax cuts be continued?” We used their answers to these questions to place them on a scale that we created that spanned from Liberal on the left to Conservative on the right. We then had them place themselves on the scale to see where they considered themselves to be and also to label where they believed Mitt Romney and Barack Obama to fall. At the end of class, we gave them blank ones and asked them to do the same thing again so we could see if they had changed after becoming more informed. We then started out with the first and foremost important thing, voter registration. We provided voter registration forms for the state of Indiana and then took requests for out of state and absentee request forms. While we did not make everyone register, it would have been slightly pointless to be in the class without the intention of voting so we wanted to make this as easy as possible. The next step was to catch everyone up to speed on the election thus far. We reviewed the results of the Republican Primary, The Supreme Court’s ruling on Healthcare Reform, the pick of Paul Ryan as Vice President and the recent co-pay free birth control mandate that had been introduced. We also held a brief discussion and explained some points about Mitt Romney’s history with Bain Capital and why so much media time was devoted to his taxes. We decided that this would be the structure of the class. We would discuss recent political stories from the week before and show relevant video clips, then we would move on to the assignment they had prepared and talk about the lesson of that particular day. We decided this because it made it necessary for them to pay attention to the news every week.

Before we could dive into the issues, we thought it was important for them to understand how the political system and elections work. We started our first week with assigned readings on primaries and the Electoral College. These articles not only explained the process but also provided some pros and cons of the system. We then spent the entire class time discussing how the Electoral College works, its history and why it was implemented in the first place. Many of the students expressed that they had come to assume that the electoral college was detrimental and unfair and should be removed, but after learning the reasoning behind it they were much more accepting of it. It no longer felt like a rule to diminish the rights of the people, but rather a tool to allow all the states to have equal representation in the election process. A few also suggested new ways to reform the system, but none of them used the Electoral College as a reason not to vote as many in our generation do.

In week three we moved to party platforms. For their homework assignment we had them create their own party platform, modeled after the official platform of the Republican and Democrats. This allowed them to put their beliefs down on paper and give them a rank, of sorts, so they could establish what issues were the most important to them individually. We then had them compare their platforms to the Republican platform and then to the Democratic platform and write about the similarities, differences and which one was the closest to their own personal platform. The students seemed to enjoy this assignment the most and we believe it was very helpful in establishing their political beliefs. It is one thing to listen to a political pundit or candidate talk and nod your head and say, “Yes, that makes sense.” It is another to have to write down a brief list of what is most important to you and explain why. This allows you to really determine where you

stand on political issues. We spent the majority of that class time making sure the differences between the two platforms were clear and many of them shared parts of their own creed with the class. The difficult part were those students who didn't strongly lean either way, but were a mix of both. With those students we encouraged them to either match up to see which has the most similarities or to rank their beliefs in order of importance and match those up.

Part of being in this class was paying attention to the news coverage, but we were very much aware that many sources are biased in one direction or the other. We wanted this information to be shared with our students, so we assigned them to pick two articles on the same story but from different news sources and to compare the stories based on each source's bias. We then had a guest speaker, Dr. Daniel Reagan of the Political Science department, who had recently been studying media bias and Congress. He talked with the class about how to sift through all the information available and how to create habits of getting our information from various news sources. He also taught about the nature of media bias, why it is difficult to avoid and why people watch the same news sources continuously. The lecture was very interesting for us as well and we are very thankful for Dr. Reagan taking the time out of his day to help us. The students seemed very responsive to Dr. Reagan's talk and we thought it was very important to have someone speak to them besides us to give us extra credibility and to see a different perspective from someone who professionally studies the subject.

We then started to move into specifics of the 2012 election. Once we determined they had a steady base of knowledge on the election process, we moved into the campaigns of our two candidates. This was primarily a media day where we watched

campaign commercials from each side and looked at the slogans and other forms of media and discuss the strategies of each side, what impressions the videos gave off and what message worked for each student. We also spent time discussing the various costs and aspects of running a campaign. The general consensus was surprise at the amount of money being spent on the campaigns and we had a discussion about the merits of this and about where each candidate should acquire the funds to run a campaign; from donations, Super PACs, and others.

We believed it was also important to cover issues specifically pressing to the 2012 election. Of those, we deemed the new healthcare bill to be most important due to the high volume of media attention it received, its complexity and the confusion of the details associated with it, and it being the most prominent piece of legislation President Obama has passed to date. During our sixth week of class we spent the entire duration of class covering the various facets of the bill. We assigned various articles to be read about the bill in order to facilitate our class discussion. Once in class, we stood at the whiteboard and made a column for pros and a column for cons and called on our class to help fill in the columns. This allowed us to further discuss each facet in more detail as they were called off. We delved into issues such as how birth control is covered, how preexisting conditions are covered, the affects of this legislation on insurance companies, the mandatory tax and how that affects the deficit, extending how long children can stay on their parent's insurance plan, the Medicare "donut hole," the effect on small business, etc. We believe this cleared up a lot of confusion that existed in our class about healthcare. Out of the fourteen students in our class, ten of them listed healthcare as the thing they learned most about in our class.

We spent the next week in class covering issues we also believed to be of specific importance to the 2012 election including environment and energy policy, immigration, and each candidate's plan for taxation. This class also aligned with the end of the first presidential debate, so we showed many video clips highlighting each candidate's performance in that debate and held discussion regarding our views on their performances and what the pundits and experts were saying about it. We put a strong emphasis on the debates and covering these issues because we believed it was essential for our students to know where the candidates stood on key issues and what their plan was to address it.

Because of our feelings on that, we wanted to conduct a large scale assignment that would leave our students informed of the ins and outs of the candidates' plans on key platform issues. In the spirit of presidential debates and the importance placed on them, we decided to hold mock debates in class where students would be assigned a candidate (half of them acting as Governor Romney and the other half acting as President Obama), and each assigned a different platform plank. The seven platform planks we chose were Healthcare, Environmental Policy, Immigration, Taxes and Job Creation, Family Planning and Abortion, Foreign Policy, and Welfare and Medicare. Each debate lasted between ten and fifteen minutes and we posed approximately five different questions per debate allowing one candidate to answer the question and the other to give his rebuttal to the question and give his own stance on it. We also allowed for each candidate to give a closing statement. Our questions were in large part based on questions posed during the televised presidential debates. The purpose of this assignment was to create an expertise in a student on one particular portion of a candidate's platform and convey his or her

expertise to the rest of the class. We wanted everyone to know the ins and outs of the candidates' plans and we believed hosting a debate was an effective way to do so. It also encouraged our class to watch the televised presidential debates since that is where we got the majority of our material as moderators for our in-class debates. We feel the debates are an important part of the election season and very informative, and thus it is important to watch them.

Our final assignment for the class due the last week of class was a formal paper. The prompt was, "Who are you voting for and why?" We realize this can be a sensitive subject for some so we offered an alternate prompt, however everyone stuck with the original. Our class was never one to shy away from discussing their political opinions in class, and the reasons for their voting behavior in their papers was just as candid. It is interesting to note that eight of our students voted for Governor Romney and six of them voted for President Obama. One of the main focuses of this course was to encourage people to become more civically engaged and ultimately to vote. People in our age group have the lowest voter turnout of all age groups so we consider encouraging our generation to vote so that our voices are represented very important. We also wanted to encourage people not only to vote, but also to be informed on exactly who and what they are voting for. We want them to understand the fine details of each candidate's platform so that they cannot only cast their vote knowledgably, but so they can be informed and share their opinions with others. To us it was very important to put into words the reasons they are choosing to vote for a particular candidate so they can articulate those reasons when asked about it and so they have a deeper understanding of their own political beliefs and identity. Knowing oneself politically was another goal of this class, and

identifying how one feels on a wide array of issues not only helps shape a person's political identity, it also helps you align oneself with a presidential candidate.

We also wanted to conduct a small amount of research in this course to see if a person's political identity or whom they are planning to vote for would change throughout the course. Our hope at the beginning of class was that our students would start seeking out more election news on their own in order to be more informed to make a voting decision and to also be able to contribute to classroom discussion since discussion was such an important aspect of the class. Through our survey we discovered that two of our students were already watching or reading the news daily at the beginning of the course and continued to do so at the end of the course. Of the remaining twelve students, ten of them had increased their news intake by the end of the course. This shows that students became more interested in discovering more about the discourse of the election as the class progressed. We also asked students to rate how politically informed they are on a scale of 1-10 at the beginning of the class and at the end of the class. Every student said they were more informed than they were at the beginning of class, and of those four students rated themselves five or more points higher at the end of the class. We also asked students whether or not they changed their mind on whom they were going to vote for throughout the class. We had multiple people say they were undecided at the start of the semester and that the course was a valuable asset in helping them decide. We also had one student whose vote was going one way at the beginning of class, and ended up going a different way at the end of the class.

At the beginning of class we asked students to rank themselves on a continuum of conservative to liberal where they believed they fell on the continuum. At the

beginning of class one student, we'll call him Student A, classified himself as a moderate conservative, however at the end of class he considered himself a moderate liberal and ended up voting to reelect president Obama. Through a survey we initiated we asked students how they felt on various issues such as: do you support Obamacare? Should we raise taxed on the wealthy? Should we continue offshore drilling? Student A's ideology based on these questions only moved a couple of points throughout the course so their political identity change was made through self discovery and not necessarily through changing view points. Another student, Student B, classified herself as fairly liberal at the beginning of the course, however after learning more about each candidate's platforms and becoming more politically informed, ended up voting for Mitt Romney. For those students whose votes did not change, some claim they just became more confident that they were making the right decision throughout the course. Essentially, we wanted students to understand where they stood and where the candidate's stood and make the best decision for them.

Self-discovery was an essential aspect to our course. Through various surveys and questions that we raised during classroom discussion and in homework, we helped students iterate their political beliefs and helped inform them how their views lined up with a party's and directly to the candidate's views. Throughout the course we can proudly say that everyone feels more politically informed than they were at the beginning of class, and we can hopefully assume that they voted knowledgably and with confidence in their decision.

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Supplementary Material

- Syllabus
- Political Identity Spectrum #1
- Political Identity Spectrum #2
- Political Identity Spectrum #3
- Political Identity Spectrum #4
- Political Participation Post Class Survey #1
- Political Participation Post Class Survey #2
- Debate Class Project Assignments
- Sample Weekly Assignment
- Sample Final Paper Assignment

Discovering Your Political Animal

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Course Description:

The goal of this class is to provide the information necessary for students to be informed members of our political society. We will be engaging in discussion and debates, researching the political process, and following the election news closely in order to ensure that each one of us can vote based on all the information readily available.

Topics will include: the Primary process, the Electoral College, party platforms, political media, campaigns, candidate's stances and important issues in the 2012 election.

The Master Syllabus for HONRS 390 lists the following course objectives:

Students should be able to

- ❑ critically analyze various aspects of the course topic
- ❑ synthesize information from multiple sources (including new and existing knowledge)
- ❑ articulate their thoughts through well-crafted discussions, writings, presentations, and projects
- ❑ generate knowledge both independently and collaboratively
- ❑ elucidate their lifelong learning skills

A Note About Academic Freedom:

In social science classrooms, academic freedom most frequently comes up in two aspects: charges of "offensiveness" or "brainwashing" or "indoctrination." While you have the right to be free of gratuitous insult, you do not have the right not to be offended. We mean something very specific by this: At a university, you do not have the right to be protected from words, ideas, values, or beliefs—whether conservative or liberal, religious or secular, putatively obscene, or any other category—that you find distasteful. A key part of any education is the careful scrutiny of received ideas. You can, though, count on us not to take up class time pontificating on current events unrelated to the text at hand. By the same token, you should feel free to disagree, either verbally or in your assignments, with any idea expressed in class, whether by us or by any student. Your grade will not be determined by how closely your thought agrees with ours; rather, it will be exclusively the product of the quality of both your thinking and work in the class.

We ask then, that you be respectful of other people's opinions and maintain an acceptable discussion atmosphere for everyone.

Class Policies:

Cell Phones: We ask that cellphones are kept away for the entire class. The nature of the discussion in this class requires you to pay attention to be successful.

Laptops: You are encouraged to have your homework pulled up on your laptop to refer to in discussion, but the use of laptops must be reserved for this. If you are seen to be on a non-relevant site we will ask you to close it and reconsider this policy if it continues.

Absences: Because this class is only 10 weeks and we only meet once a week, attendance is necessary for you to be successful. For this reason, after 2 unexcused absences we reserve the right to automatically fail you. If you must miss, please contact us to discuss it.

Late Work: You only have one assignment per week and we expect this to be turned in via email by midnight the night before our class Thursday. Each late day will result in a 5 point deduction. However, if there are extenuating circumstances please e-mail us when and if they come up, and we will gladly try to work something out with you.

Special Concerns:

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible. The information you need to contact me is given at the top of the first page of this syllabus. If you need to request an accommodation, you should also visit the Disabled Student Development Office, Student Center 307, 287-5293.

Academic Dishonesty:

You are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic honesty. Please refer to Section VII and other applicable sections of the Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities for information about what constitutes academic dishonesty, including plagiarism. If you have questions about whether something is academic dishonesty, consult with me first for clarification. Ignorance of the code is no excuse. Anyone found plagiarizing will receive an "F" on the assignment and I will consider taking the matter through the University's justice system for dealing with this issue.

Required Textbooks:

There are no textbook requirements for this class, but you will be required to follow various news sources and keep up to date on election news. Any other required reading will be provided for you.

Grading Policy:

Homework	90 pts (6 assignments worth 15 pts each)
Participation	60 pts
Debate	100 pts
Final Paper	150 pts
Total	400 pts

Assignments:

Students are expected to follow current events involving the election and be prepared to discuss them at the beginning of every class period. This class will have a large focus on current news, so in order to effectively participate one must be up to date.

Students will have a two page written assignment due at the beginning of every class pertaining to the current lecture. Assignments will be posted on Blackboard, and they can be turned in by e-mail by midnight the night before class. The assignments will also be discussed in class so you can bring a hard copy to class with you or reference it via laptop.

Each student will be assigned a specific election issue and a candidate. They will research their candidate's stance on that issue and be prepared to answer questions in a debate setting in class as their candidate.

Finally, instead of a final exam each student will write a final paper on a topic to be discussed later in the semester.

Course Schedule:

Week One -- 8/23

Intro/Syllabus

Voter Registration/Survey

Week Two -- 8/30

Primary, Caucus, Electoral College

Homework Assignment 1 Due

Week Three -- 9/6

Party Platforms

Homework Assignment 2 Due

Week Four -- 9/13

Political Media

Homework Assignment 3 Due

Week Five -- 9/20

Campaigns

Homework Assignment 4 Due

Week Six -- 9/27

Election 2012 Issues

Assign Debate Topics

Homework Assignment 5 Due

Week Seven -- 10/4

Election 2012 Issues

Debate Prep

Homework Assignment 6 Due

NO CLASS 10/11

Week Eight -- 10/18

Debates

Week Nine -- 10/25

Debates

NO CLASS 11/1

Week Ten -- 11/8

Final Paper Due

Exit Survey